

Sannosai Festival

Hiyoshi Taisha Shrine is famous for the Sannosai Festival. The lively festival has been celebrated annually for more than 1,200 years and is one of the three major festivals in the Lake Biwa region. Festivities start at the beginning of March, but the main events take place from April 12 to 14, usually surrounded by cherry blossoms.

On the evening of April 12, two *mikoshi* (portable shrines) are carried down from shrine buildings near the top of Mt. Hachioji. The shrine buildings are roughly 30 minutes from Hiyoshi Taisha by foot, but the procession is a raucous one, with torches burning and people chanting. The deities inside the *mikoshi* are being brought to the foot of the mountain to get married. The shrine has seven 400-year-old *mikoshi*, but those used in the festival were built around 40 years ago.

On April 13, the priests of Hiyoshi Taisha offer tea to four deities from a small local field that is believed to be Japan's oldest tea plantation. During the day, there is a flower parade through the surrounding streets, with children dressed in suits of armor. When it gets dark, large bundles of bamboo are set alight and people run through the streets and into the shrine grounds carrying the bamboo or twirling wooden torches. Runners line up in front of the *mikoshi*, which are rocked violently to symbolize labor pains and then dropped to the ground, representing the birth of a child to the married deities. Finally, people lift the *mikoshi* and run with them through the dark shrine grounds, shouting and chanting, while a large crowd cheers them on.

A calmer procession takes place on the final day, April 14, when the *mikoshi* are carried from the shrine down the mountainside to the lake. The portable shrines are put on boats, which sail around the lake before the *mikoshi* are unloaded and returned to Hiyoshi Taisha.